

Summary Report

IBSA International Panel Discussion on Child Labour Policy Frameworks



Labour Ministers and Ambassadors from India, Brazil and South Africa (IBSA) joined together on 19th April 2010 in an international panel discussion on child labour hosted in Washington, D.C. by the International Center on Child Labor and Education (ICCLE), the International Advocacy Office of the Global March Against Child Labour and the Brazil Institute at the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars whose Director, Mr Paulo Sotero, also chaired the event.

Under the broader theme of “Policy Frameworks on Child Labour”, the panellists had been asked to review national policy approaches to tackling child labour as a priority in their countries, presenting key government programmes and lessons learned in harmonising policy frameworks to ensure the mainstreaming of the issue across public service provision to reinforce sustainability. It was also expected that discussions would focus on the importance of broad-based awareness activities aimed at the general public and various stakeholder groups.

The event was particularly important from a global strategic point of view as it was being held on the eve of the Global Conference on Child Labour being co-organised from 10-11 May 2010 by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment of the Netherlands. Opening the presentations was Ambassador of India to the United States of America, Ms Meera Shankar, who affirmed the commitment of the Indian government to the IBSA process. She went on to share insights into the challenges of targeting child labourers through government-sponsored social development programmes, focusing in particular on children in worst forms of child labour and their families, and the steps to be taken to ensure effective outcomes.

Ms Shankar explained that the current main focus of an inter-ministerial core group was to harness resources and integrate programmes from various government departments to ensure that the most vulnerable children and their families would be able to benefit from the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. This programme ensures a minimum of 100 days of employment a year for adults, helping them to be able to keep their children in schools during times of financial hardship. In addition, the government offers education, rehabilitation support and social protection initiatives, such as a midday meal so that children in school do not go hungry and can benefit from the nutrition they need to study effectively. The Ambassador closed her presentation by noting that the Indian government is actively pursuing the process of ratification of ILO Convention No. 138 on the minimum age of employment and No. 182 on the worst forms of child labour. This is being done through the establishment of a working group to align the legal framework in the context of raising the minimum age of employment from the current age of 14 to 18 years.

In a personal reflection in opening his presentation, Minister of Labour of Brazil Mr Carlos Roberto Lupi recalled that he himself had been obliged to work as a child, but this changed when his mother insisted that he go to school. He pointed out to the audience that he had managed to do so well in his professional career in life because of the incredible commitment of his mother towards education and in making sure that he did not drop out. Minister Lupi underlined the commitment of the Brazilian government to fostering a closer relationship between the IBSA countries on a range of issues, including child labour. He highlighted the leading role they play in national and global efforts to eliminate and prevent child labour. Through targeted and innovative strategies, the IBSA countries provide preventive and rehabilitative support to vulnerable children and families and have been successful in building the capacities of key institutions to tackle child labour. In addition, the Brazilian government has provided a comprehensive social safety net for 45 million families through the implementation of various cash transfer schemes.

Minister Lupi explained that the IBSA countries had a broad and significant experience and expertise in the field of child labour elimination and prevention which could be made readily available to others through the establishment of detailed knowledge databases and the promotion and dissemination of tried and tested models of effective intervention. He emphasised the importance of strong South-South cooperation frameworks and explained that the IBSA countries are committed to the development and promotion of effective knowledge management systems and processes on child labour elimination and investment in capacity-building in the countries of their three regions.

In reflecting on the subject matter of the panel, Minister of Labour of South Africa Mr Membathisi Mdladlana was reminded of his tough life in South Africa, growing up as a child and working hard to make ends meet in a predominantly pastoral environment. He pointed out how situations were changing and beginning to improve in the light of South Africa becoming a signatory to ILO Conventions Nos. 138 and 182, although there remained isolated incidences of child prostitution, child trafficking and situations in which children were taken on to carry out hazardous work or used for criminal activities.

The government has put in place a number of social protection programmes to reach out to vulnerable children, including school meals, school fees' exemptions and children's grants. Minister Mdladlana pointed out that the panel represented a ground-breaking effort to build closer relations between the three countries and establish and strengthen mechanisms to share technical knowledge on child labour elimination and prevention and build institutional capacity to address this critical issue effectively. The Minister went on to explain that – although in a more limited way – the knowledge and technical expertise of the South African government is currently being shared with the governments of Namibia, Lesotho, Botswana and Zimbabwe. In closing, he expressed his appreciation for the organisation of the IBSA panel discussion and called for the practice to be further strengthened and continued.

In reflecting on the forthcoming Global Conference on Child Labour, the three government representatives welcomed the collaboration between the ILO and the Dutch government that led to the organisation of this major event. They highlighted its importance in the light of the global economic crisis and the impact this has had on development and humanitarian aid and the diminishing attention of the international community on the elimination and prevention of child labour.

They also expressed the determination of the IBSA countries to assume leading roles in their respective continents to tackle child labour and committed themselves to the development of a shared IBSA process to immediately prepare for the Hague Conference. In addition, they underlined the importance of a joint examination and analysis of the Hague Conference document, the so-called "Roadmap 2016", to ensure that it articulates the aspirations of the IBSA countries and takes into account their significant knowledge, experience and expertise which would be critical in achieving a world without child labour.

In his closing remarks, panel moderator, Dr Sudhanshu Joshi, Director of the ICCLE, expressed his hope that this historic IBSA International Panel would lead to the establishment of an IBSA Working Group on Child Labor that would underpin the joint efforts of the these three countries to consider, evaluate and provide inputs into the Hague Conference and Roadmap 2016. ■